

HELLP PodCast – Dr. Barbara J. Dray – April 22, 2008
Reducing Disproportionality for English language learners in Special Education:
The Role of Head Start Educators

What is Disproportionality?

Disproportionate representation is the over/under representation of groups (e.g., by race/ethnicity, socio-economic class, language dominance, gender, etc.) within specific categories of disability (e.g., learning disability (LD), mild mental retardation (MMR), emotional/behavior disorder (EDBD), etc.).¹

What are the trends of disproportionality?

African Americans tend to be over represented in the categories of MMR and EDBD and American Indians tend to be over represented in the categories of EDBD and LD.² Historically, English language learners (ELLs) those for which English is not their first language, have been under represented in special education. However, recent research demonstrates that ELLs of Hispanic decent (Spanish-speaking) who have limited language supports tend to be over represented in the categories of MMR and LD.³

What are language supports?

Optimal language supports for English language learners includes access to native language instruction and high quality ESL.

For English language learners, research consistently demonstrates that children who have access to appropriate language supports (e.g., native language instruction and high quality ESL) are more likely to yield higher standardized test scores and have better developed cognitive academic language skills than those who have limited access to language supports. ELLs from English Immersion

¹ See Garcia, S. B., & Ortiz, A. A. (2006). *Preventing disproportionate representation: Culturally and linguistically responsive prereferral interventions*. National Center for Culturally Responsive Educational Systems (NCCREST).

² See Losen, D., & Orfield, G. (Eds.). (2002). *Racial inequity in special education*. Cambridge, MA: Harvard Education Publishing Group.

³ See Artiles, A. J., Rueda, R. Salazar, J. J., & Higaeda, I. (2005). With-in group diversity in minority disproportionate representation: English language learners in urban school districts. *Exceptional Children*, 71(3), 283-300.

(English-only) programs with minimal language supports are three times as likely to be referred for special education than ELLs from bilingual programs.⁴

Additionally, research demonstrates that ELLs who are placed in special education tend to be placed in the most restrictive segregated environments⁵, are less likely to receive language supports (e.g., native language instruction and high quality ESL), and were more likely to receive English only instruction.⁶

What can Head Start Educators do to reduce disproportionality of ELLs?

The following are recommendations for reducing disproportionality of ELLs in special education:

1. Provide access to optimal language supports. Instruction for ELLs with minimal English proficiency should begin in the native language of the child with high quality English as a Second Language supports. As children acquire proficiency both socially and academically in their native language, English (if not the dominant language of the home) can be introduced using English as a Second language instructional methods.
2. Routinely collect data systematically to monitor children's progress in both the native language and English. For children acquiring more than one language at a time (e.g., Spanish/English, Arabic/English, etc.) it is critical to gather data in both languages as multilingual children tend to display sporadic skills in each language. Composite skills in both languages reveal a more accurate picture of the child's abilities. Progress monitoring data should be used to both measure children's skills and response to instruction, so that decisions can be made to continue to promote optimal language development.
3. Attend professional development workshops/trainings regularly. Research on language development is dynamic and continues to grow, so it is important to keep yourself current. If you work primarily with English language learners, it is critical that you have professional development in first and second language acquisition, effective strategies and techniques for developing native language and English as a second language, progress

⁴ See Artiles et. al. (2005).

⁵ See de Valenzuela, J.S., Copeland, S. R., Qi, C. H., & Park, M. (2006). Examining educational equity: Revisiting the disproportionate representation of minority students in special education. *Exceptional Children*, 72(4), 425-441.

⁶ See Zehler, A. M., Fleischman, H. L., Hopstock, P. J. , Pendzick, M. L., & Stephenson, T. G. (2003). *Descriptive study of services to LEP students and LEP students with disabilities: Findings on special education LEP students* (Special Topic Report #4). Washington, DC: Office of English Language Acquisition, U.S. Department of Education (Contract No. ED-00-CO-0089).

- monitoring approaches for ELLs, and approaches for working with multilingual families.
4. Institute a pre-referral process. For further information on this topic download the practitioner brief by Drs. Shernaz García and Alba Ortiz on *Preventing disproportionate representation: Culturally and linguistically responsive prereferral interventions* at <http://www.nccrest.org/publications/briefs.html>.
 5. Administer culturally and linguistically responsive assessment. For further information on this topic see Dr. Rebecca Valdivia's PodCast at <http://www.hellp.org/tools/podcasts/>.